

Organizing Inaugural Balls

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OBJECTIVES

The Great American Inaugural Balls are not a victory party for those who won the elections, but a celebration of democracy. They are a “bon voyage” party for the next generation of young leaders. Like all the generations that have gone before them, they too, must create their democracy anew.

Organizing an inaugural ball or other inaugural celebration as part of your mock election efforts will enable students to:

1. celebrate democracy.
2. explore the power and limitations of the presidency.
3. discover the controversies about presidential power throughout our history.
4. reinforce classroom lessons with active participation.¹
5. experience open communication between parents and children.
6. involve the community in the work of schools.

METHODS

The first Great American Inaugural Balls, in 1992, were a resounding success. The participants varied from inner city schools, to suburban schools in “silk stocking” districts, to rural communities; all levels of schools participated as well. The “balls” varied from an Indian powwow in South Dakota to formal ballroom dancing in Minnesota to a calypso band in Florida.

They all had one thing in common, a desire to open communication between parents and children in today’s troubled times, and to help young Americans in the 1990s chart their way through the churning waters that will mark their passage from childhood in the 20th century to adulthood in the 21st. A successful inaugural ball consists of the following phases:

1. Research the power of the presidency.
2. Plan and organize your inaugural ball.

1. Celebrating Inaugural Balls and the power of Americans to choose their leaders helps reinforce students’ understanding of the meaning and importance of the Constitution, as suggested in the New Nationals Standards for Civics and Government. See the new standards, Section III. The new standards also state that students should understand not only concepts related to limited government but also concepts related to the leadership role of political figures (and their abilities to fulfill these roles) to be able to participate intelligently in the evaluation of existing and proposed laws. See the new standards, Section I.



Somewhere among you may
be the boys or girls who will
be the presidents, senators,
congressmen and women,
legislators, and other leaders
of the 21st century.

1. Research the power of the presidency.

“The American colonists fought for their independence from an autocratic king in 1776. Afterward, they sought to establish a government which would be without a powerful chief executive,” Kay Ashby Held and Janie Worst point out.

“The solution to the limitation of executive power was written into the constitution with the formation of the three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial. Each of these three branches were given means to ‘check’ or balance the power of the other two. For instance, no bills can be passed except by consent of both houses of Congress; all revenue bills must originate in the House; the President can veto legislation; the Congress can override the veto; and the Supreme Court rules on the constitutionality of law. These checks and balances have enabled our government to function for over 200 years without any one of the three branches becoming too powerful. To ensure that the Constitution would remain the basis of our government, the document was made ‘the Supreme Law of the Land.’

“Although the powers and limitations of the President are set down in Article II, throughout the years many interpretations of the limits of presidential power have been made.”

Review this concept with students, and survey the way these interpretations have changed throughout our history by exploring the following events and ideas:

- ★ Why did Henry Clay state on the floor of the House, “No commander in chief in this country has absolute power over life and death at his sole discretion”? Because such power would be “contrary to the laws and genius of our laws and institutions”? Why did he accuse President Monroe of telling Congress one thing and doing another? To which war was he referring?
- ★ On what basis did Abraham Lincoln justify the right to suspend the writ of habeas corpus (the legal protection afforded to any person under arrest to be brought before a judge and charged with a crime)? the right to order summary arrest (arrest without any warrant)? the right to confiscate private

property and the right to suppress free expression? How did he use executive proclamations rather than the legislative process to run the government?

Why did Lincoln, in asking Congress to ratify his measures, say he believed that “nothing had been done beyond the constitutional competency of Congress?” Why did the Supreme Court, in *ex parte* Milligan, only one year after the Civil War, affirm that the President had usurped the war power? Read *ex parte* Milligan. Do you agree with the majority opinion? Why? Why not?

- ★ Why was President McKinley accused of letting foreign policy preempt the precepts of fundamental laws in the U.S. actions in the Philippines and China, at the turn of the century?
- ★ Did Teddy Roosevelt have congressional authorization to take Panama?
- ★ Why did the late Senator Jacob Javits, sponsor of the War Powers Act, state that the seeds of the Vietnam war had been planted in Panama?
- ★ What led Theodore Roosevelt to sign a secret executive agreement stating he would regard with favor the establishment of a Japanese protectorate over Korea?
- ★ Why was Woodrow Wilson, who had been given more power by Congress during a war than any previous president, unable to carry the Congress with him when he sought to win the peace?
- ★ When were “term limits” first established for the President? When did the Supreme Court rule that “executive privilege” did not permit a president to defy a court order?
- ★ What effect did President Reagan’s purported involvement in the Iran-Contra affair have on the nation’s view of the powers of the president? What other incidents can you name? What do you believe will be the effect of the line-item veto?

- ★ What price might we pay for limiting the power of a President, especially as commander in chief, during a time of war? What price might we pay for weakening the “government of laws, not of men” outlined in our Constitution? What powers did the German parliament, the Reichstag, give to Adolf Hitler that led to the end of the Weimar Republic?

2. Plan and organize your inaugural ball.

The following steps will contribute to a successful inaugural event:

- ★ Choose a format.
- ★ Determine specifics.
- ★ Invite guests.
- ★ Involve parents.
- ★ Form committees.
- ★ Select a theme.
- ★ Plan activities.
- ★ Plan refreshments.
- ★ Make decorations.
- ★ Create a take-home booklet.
- ★ Record your event.
- ★ Involve the media.
- ★ Follow up.

A. CHOOSE A FORMAT.

Explore the following formats and considerations when planning your event:

- ★ **Decide how formal you wish to be.** You may wish to hold a traditional formal dinner or dance, with everybody dressed up in “black tie.” On the flip side, you may find that “down home” affair featuring games and dances is more appropriate.

Whether you choose a formal or informal affair will determine the guests you invite (see Method 4). For example, young children may be excluded from a formal dinner, but welcome at a less formal party. Either format, or all the variations in between, are acceptable!

- ★ **Plan the music.** A key ingredient of an inaugural ball is music. Will you have a band? The school band? Another group? Will you use recorded music?

No matter who is performing, try hard to keep the music intergenerational. Learning how to share and to care about each other’s needs is one of the most important lessons you seek to teach. Your ball is not just a party, no matter how much fun you plan. Under all the fun and games you have some very serious educational intentions. One of the most important lessons of the event may be that “We the People” can work and play together, whatever our differences may be.

This is your Inaugural Ball, to design as you will. The ideas in the pages that follow are to help you define your own design, no matter how different you wish it to be. Freedom of choice is one of our great American traditions. Tolerance for the choices of others is a custom we must work hard at to pass on to our children.

There are no rules for these Inaugural Balls other than that they must include both generations, must be drug and alcohol free, and nonpartisan. They are a celebration of the Inauguration of a new President in a “government of the people, by the people, and for the people.” They are a rededication of the ideals that made America a beacon of hope for all the world. Beyond that, the way that is right is the way that is right for you!

B. DETERMINE SPECIFICS.

- ★ **Place.** Once you have decided what the atmosphere of your ball will be, your next question is “where?” the school gym? cafeteria? a community center? a nearby university? a local hotel willing to make a pro-bono contribution? a bank or a corporation willing to let you have a portion of their space for the evening?

Make sure that the site will provide enough tables and chairs for all the guests you wish to invite.

- ★ **Time.** Choose the time on January 20, Inauguration Day, that is right for you. Some communities plan evening events, others daytime; some a full-scale dinner and dance, others a celebration during the classroom day. This is your party.
- ★ **Cost.** Will you sell tickets to the ball to help defray the cost, or keep the cost to a bare minimum? Will you raise funds for the ball by soliciting parents, and local storekeepers? Try putting the pros and cons on a sheet of paper. Involve young students in the decision. What information are you missing? What needs to be researched? Planning a party can be a great lesson in decision making! Be sure you involve the school administration as well. What rules and regulations are there that need to be complied with?
- ★ **Liability and security.** These are two important practicalities to keep in mind. The organization responsible for the ball accepts all liabilities. Are the premises you are considering safe? Is there adequate fire protection? police protection? parking space or public transportation? Do you need to set up a neighborhood watch while the partygoers are coming or going, or while they are inside? Once inside, will youngsters be permitted to leave and return at will? You may wish to post a list of rules at the entrance to the event.

C. INVITE GUESTS.

- ★ **Make a guest list.** A basic guest list could consist of students, parents, and school personnel. You may be pleasantly surprised by who else wishes to join you. Your members of congress, state legislators, governor, mayor, or other local officials may attend your event if invited. A reminder: the Great American Inaugural Ball is a nonpartisan celebration of democracy. Be sure to send invitations to both sides of the aisle!

You may also wish to invite representatives from the community: local business owners, members of volunteer organizations, or perhaps even the residents of a senior citizens' center.

You may also choose to make your event broader than your own community. Inviting parents and students from a school in a distant neighborhood is one way to help students learn to live in the pluralistic society in 21st century America.

Whether or not you wish to include young children in your event will probably depend on the type of format you have chosen.

- ★ **Create and send out invitations.** Have students design and/or create invitations that will be sent out to all guests, including politicians and dignitaries. Designing and writing the invitations is a great language arts lesson. (Please send samples of your invitations to the mock election committee.)

Students may also wish to write letters to accompany the invitations sent to politicians and officials. You could request that he or she send a letter of greetings to participants if unable to attend.

Students can create invitations with easily available materials; if you've chosen a more formal format, perhaps a local printer could contribute printed invitations—and programs too—in exchange for being permitted to place their company name on them. A local newspaper is another source that might contribute to the printing. Invite your contributors to attend your event and give them press recognition whenever you can.

D. INVOLVE PARENTS.

How do you get parents to come? The answer is so simple it sometimes escapes us. **By having their children extend the invitation and really mean it.**

We will never forget what a class of teenagers taught us at Cathedral High School in New York City. Only four parents had shown up for a parent participation event their teachers had worked long and hard on. “We can’t leave work early,” the parents said, or “The children travel from all over the city—we don’t feel any ties to the high school,” or “Teenagers don’t want their parents involved.” The “reasons” went on and on.

The children made the problem their own. The class wrote personal letters of invitation to each other’s parents, and followed up with personal phone calls. (A great language arts lesson, it turned out.) They put up their own posters in the school lobby. They gave spare posters to local shops to place in store windows. They sent out a class newsletter. (Another great language arts lesson.)

One girl spoke to the congregation at her church. Some wrote letters to the local newspaper, to employers, to radio stations. They organized their own “get out the parents” campaign. They won. Four weeks later, 40 parents showed up. One girl brought her minister as a surrogate parent when her mother could not come, one her grandmother, one her mother’s boyfriend. All were warmly received. All had a wonderful time.

Parents are pressed, harried, exhausted. But they are also lonely, bored, isolated—even in today’s fast-moving world. Make your Inaugural Ball an occasion that will be as much fun for the parents (including single parents, surrogate parents, foster parents, and grandparents) as it is for their children, and then let the children communicate that this will be a fun time for grownups, too. Let them take responsibility for the turn-out, but be there to help, guide, cajole, persuade. And follow up with your own telephone calls, your own “head counts.” Set a role model of persistence—it pays off.

Consider extending invitations to senior citizens in your community. One elementary school in Florida held a candle-lit “adoption ceremony” for surrogate grandparents from a local senior citizens home. The new grandparents told their young admirers about the elections they remembered. Some went back before Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The NBC camera crew that came for “just 15 minutes” stayed for the full day.

Research has long since proved that involving parents has a significant effect on school achievement, so your students will benefit from this effort as well.

E. RECRUIT VOLUNTEERS.

- ★ **Explore resources.** Don’t try to be a one-man band. The best of us have unplanned emergencies to cope with and need back-up help that is fully prepared to step in. If you try to go it alone not only will you be inviting problems, you will be missing an outstanding teaching opportunity. The Great American Inaugural Ball offers some great opportunities for cooperative learning, and for teaching that Fourth R—Responsibility. Why not ask for volunteers to work with the children? a local senior citizens group? civic group? the Junior League? your parent-teacher association? Everyone loves a party—especially if they are invited as a result of their hard work.
- ★ **Form committees.** Students and other volunteers could be organized into committees such as: Invitations, Decorations, Refreshments, Entertainment, Press, Contributions, Safety and Security, Transportation, Baby-sitting, Contests & Prizes, and Photography.
- ★ **Find a Master of Ceremonies.** An emcee can make a great contribution to your event, especially one with an ability to entertain members of all generations. Is there a teacher with a great sense of humor who can play this role? a father or mother? community leader? student leader? recreation director? entertainer? If you run out of possibilities, try local fraternal organizations, women’s groups, television stations, and newspapers. Somewhere, hiding under that bushel basket, is the talent you are looking for. If possible, involve your master of ceremonies in the planning stages.

F. SELECT A THEME.

You may wish to choose a theme for your Ball. One group of mothers in Memphis, Tennessee, organized a “White House Tea” as a National Student/Parent Mock Election activity. Couples came dressed as past presidents and their wives, with youngsters researching historic costumes to be sure they were accurate.

If you are concerned about the problems of being out at night in your community, an afternoon “Tea Dance” might be the perfect solution. You could, perhaps, carry the theme a step further and play the tunes that would have been dances for George Washington’s inauguration and on up. (Will someone volunteer to teach the minuet? the dances the “Baby Boomers” love?)

Try a brainstorming session on possible themes and ideas to go with them. You may be surprised with what students come up with. We were.

G. PLAN ACTIVITIES .

- ★ **Hold ice breakers.** Whether your Ball is formal or informal, traditional or adventurous, if you want parents and children who do not know each other to relax and enjoy each other, ice breakers can go a long way. How often have you been bored at a dance or party because all people did was “stand around?” Try the time-tested favorites, such as musical chairs, or a grand march (“Stars and Stripes Forever”). How about holding an Inaugural Parade? a conga line? a treasure hunt? a relay race? a “sing-a-long?” No, they won’t be doing those at the adults’ Inaugural Balls in Washington, D.C., but there were two children’s galas for the first time in 1992, and the President and First Lady attended both. How creative can your ice breakers be?
- ★ **Watch the real inauguration.** If the timing is right, you may wish to watch the Inauguration Ceremony together—after all, it is a milestone in American history. Make TV sets accessible to your participants if you possibly can, even a large screen TV if one can be had. You may wish to keep the TV tuned to inaugural coverage all evening, but be sure your own activities are sufficiently involving so that your ball does not turn into a TV party. The lesson is about creating your own celebration, not just watching other people have one.
- ★ **Hold dance contests.** Are there members of each generation who will engage in exhibition dance contests? Hold a contest and give prizes in different categories, such as rumba, rock-and-roll, the twist, or the Lindy. You could also hold a “name-the dance” contest. Square dances are a great intergenerational activity. Perhaps parents could lead participants in multicultural dances such as the Hora, the Russian Bear Dance, or the polka. If you are including younger children, let parents limber up with “Skip to my Lou” or “Pop Goes the Weasel.” Let the youngest teach them how. A local dance instructor may volunteer to help lead participants in dances.
- ★ **Hold historical trivia contests.** History classes can have great fun making a list of questions for partygoers to test their skills. One elementary school class in Austin, Texas, sold their local radio station their program of “Presidential Minutes” about past presidents and earned \$5,000 for their school. Trivia questions could include: Which President was too big for the White House bathtub?... was a bachelor on his Inauguration Day?... said, “The business of America is business?”... said, “Ask not what your country can do for you...” What was the date of George Washington’s inauguration? Which presidential candidate(s) won the popular vote but were never inaugurated President?
- ★ **Inaugurate a “president.”** Award the honor of “Mr. or Madam President” to the student who writes the best essay on “The American Presidency and the Rule of Law,” or on “Why ballots are more powerful than bullets, votes are more powerful than violence?” The winner must give an inauguration speech. Or hold an election for “President for the Night.”

Administer the oath of office and play “Hail to the Chief” for the winner. Let your President for the Night give his/her Inaugural Address, sit at a dais table accompanied by his/her aides—and, of course, the “Secret Service.”

H. PLAN REFRESHMENTS.

Refreshments can be as simple or elaborate as you wish them to be. Will you serve a nonalcoholic punch? tea or coffee? cookies? a spaghetti dinner cooked by students? cakes baked by each class? a school cafeteria meal? a potluck dinner? a banquet dinner at a nearby hotel for which parents must buy tickets? The decisions are all yours, but keep your refreshments in tune with the theme of your event. For the younger children a banquet is a big bore. Most teenagers prefer hamburgers and french fries. Would a local McDonald's or Pizza Hut help with a contribution in exchange for the publicity?

If parents are providing a potluck dinner, remember that these are the days of working wives; be sure there are some fathers on your refreshment committee.

I. MAKE DECORATIONS.

Your decorations will go a long way toward setting the tone for your Ball. They need not be expensive. How about the old reliable crepe-paper streamers and red, white, and blue balloons? (If you do permit smoking, be sure to separate the smokers from the potential fire hazards.)

Why not use children's paintings to help decorate the walls? posters from a poster contest? baby photos? (Match the children with their parents—or with the children their parents were.)

Other decorations could include old campaign posters, bumper stickers, and buttons contributed by local political organizations. (Remember, this is a bipartisan event.) Students could make American flags as the centerpiece for each table, or flags from each of the 50 states. (Paste them on sticks, then stand them in inverted Uncle Sam hats the children have made as well.) Is there time in your program for a rousing, flag waving sing-a-long? ("It's a Grand Old Flag," "Glory, Glory Hallelujah," "God Bless America"? Try putting the words on a screen with an overhead projector.)

Think about lighting when you plan your decorations. If there are harsh lights they can ruin your "atmosphere," despite all your efforts. A local electrician or theatrical producer may be able to help pro bono with ideas that are safe and inexpensive.

Local retailers may be willing to contribute fabric for table cloths that the school may keep, as well as items for raffle tickets that can be sold to defray expenses, or prizes for any contests you hold. (Retailers could display the logo of your Great American Inaugural Ball in their shop windows to tell the community they have contributed.)

J. CREATE A TAKE-HOME BOOKLET.

You may wish to enlist the English, Social Studies, and Art departments in this project. You may wish to create one booklet and photocopy it for each attendee, or have each student contribute a booklet he/she has compiled and decorated for families to take home as a memento. Subjects for take-home booklets could include the History of the White House and past Inaugurations, Supreme Court landmark decisions about the powers of the Presidency, and the assumption of powers not in the Constitution by Presidents in times of crisis.

K. RECORD YOUR EVENT.

You will want still photographers recording this event for parents and children, photographers who will send copies of their photos. If possible, try to get prints for parents and students and for yourself (and send photos to us at the mock election committee as well). Videotaping the event is another option.

Parents and students may volunteer as photographers or videographers, or your school district's public relations office may be able to provide someone. Remember that this is an occasion your students, and perhaps their families too, will remember for a lifetime. These will be their mementos.

L. INVITE THE MEDIA.

This is a very important part of your pilot effort. Be sure your Press and Publicity Committee stays on top of their responsibilities. (See Chapter 4 for more information on this topic.)

If volunteers from the local media help you organize your press efforts, be sure to invite them to your ball.

M. FOLLOW UP.

As with all mock election events, be sure to send letters of thanks to everyone who volunteered and contributed in other ways to your inaugural ball. You may wish to form a thank-you committee for this purpose.

Another committee may take charge of keeping a record of your event, in the form of a scrapbook or a commemorative publication of some kind. This record could include photos, programs, fliers, posters, and any news articles written about your event.